

OLD KING

Coles

WORDS Andrew Harris

PHOTOS Laurie Gordon



Onga Onga – so good they named it twice! At the heart of this thriving Hawke’s Bay community is the Coles Factory, established by Edward Coles in 1878. Much of the village was built by him and his sons, using locally grown timber. But who was Edward Coles? And why did he risk his life to come here? Local resident Andrew Harris seeks some answers.

You won’t find a bridge on Bridge Street. The main thoroughfare was named after the man who created Onga Onga. Henry Hamilton Bridge was born in Camberwell, South London on 8 October 1844. He often referred to himself as HH. Those who knew him called this dashing young English adventurer by his preferred name: Harry.

Harry Bridge was a man who cared for people and wanted to build a proper village where his farm workers and their families would feel at home. It needed to have a butcher, a baker and a candlestick maker. So why call it Onga Onga? Or is it Ongaonga? Two words or one? The jury’s been out on that for 140 years. The locals simply call it Onga.



Harry Bridge developed a deep respect for Māori and named his village after their word for a stinging nettle which grew in abundance on the banks of the local stream and all across the fertile Ruataniwha Plains.

It would bloom every four or five years, leaving the land steeped in rich, purplish thistledown. Its Sunday-best name is *Urtica ferox*, but you won't find one in the village today. (I'm told it makes delicious soup.)

Harry Bridge moved to New Zealand in search of fame, fortune and adventure. It was a distant outpost of Empire where gold was abundant and land was cheap. To the 19-year-old Harry, the siren call of the kiwi was just too enticing.

He came to Hawke's Bay where the land between the Tuki Tuki and Waipawa Rivers had been divided into four large estates: Forest Gate, Fairfield, Mt Vernon and Springhill. In 1865 William Fannin, the owner of the 7,500 acre Fairfield Estate, passed away, giving Harry Bridge the opportunity he'd been looking for.

Harry bought the estate but needed more farm workers to realise his plans. They in turn needed somewhere to live. In 1872 he drew up plans for a village, sold off 78 quarter-acre sections and started looking for someone to build Onga Onga.

Enter Edward Purkis Coles. And before you ask, Purkis was his mother's maiden name.

Edward Coles, one of five children along with twin sister Emma, was born in Portsea on 4 July 1830. He was apprenticed as a joiner and worked alongside his father, Carmi, at the Naval Dockyards, which is in nearby Portsmouth.

Carmi Coles had a long-felt desire to better himself and see more of the world. He migrated to Newfoundland several years before Edward was born, but his new life was short lived. The harsh conditions in Canada and the untimely death of his first wife forced his return to the dockyards. He married again and tried to rebuild his former life but the demand for wooden ships was falling and work was increasingly in short supply.



Henry Hamilton Bridge



Edward and Clara Coles



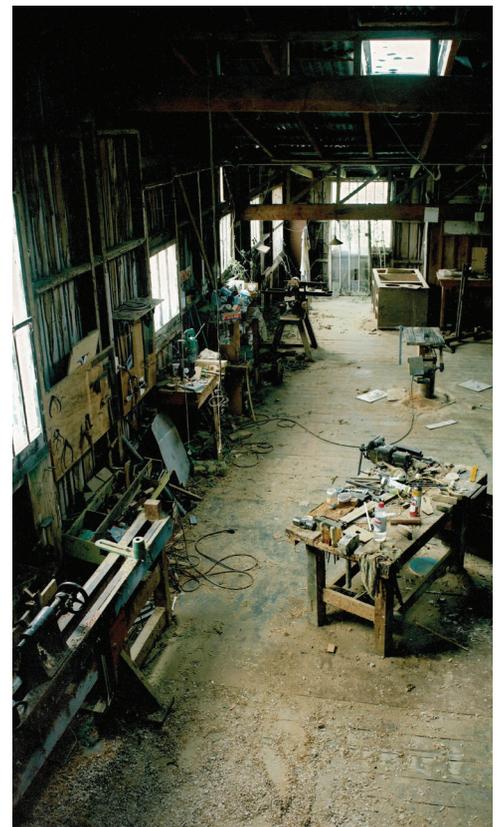
Coles factory staff, c.1906



Coles family home, Bridge Street, Onga Onga



Bridge Street, Onga Onga, c.1900



Edward could see that his future lay beyond the dockyard walls. Like his father, he wanted to make a fresh start and find a new place to live. He married Clara Barton in 1855 and shortly afterwards moved, with their first child, Annie, to the village of Droxford, around sixteen miles north of Portsmouth.

Despite turning his hand to all kinds of joinery work – including making coffins – Edward found it difficult to make ends meet. Their second child, Julia, died as a teenager. Their living conditions were cramped and disease was rife. The village didn't readily accept newcomers and getting himself established proved a constant challenge.

Times were hard across rural England and the poorhouses were full. The industrial revolution had brought mechanisation to the farmlands with a resulting increase in unemployment.

Edward had a rapidly growing family, with numerous mouths to feed. He won the respect of many villagers through his determination, flexibility and good nature. Although he lived in Droxford for over twenty years, this honest, hard-working man never really settled.

Then one day his luck changed. Out of the blue he received a letter from Harry Bridge, a landowner in New Zealand, making him an offer he couldn't refuse. The letter promised prosperity, a chance for a better life, a fresh start in a pioneering, English-speaking country and a new place to call home.

Edward had been recommended by Harry's father, Stephen Bridge, the Rector of Droxford. Stephen himself was a relative newcomer to the Hampshire village, having been born in Essex and living for many years in South London. He recognised the qualities that Edward Coles could offer his son in New Zealand and understood the timing may be right for the Coles family to make the move overseas.

On 4 May 1877, Edward and Clara Coles, with their twelve children, set sail aboard the *Columbus*, a 744-ton wooden sailing ship laden with cargo and bound for Auckland. It was to be an arduous 103-day journey. The ship nearly came to grief on many occasions. They faced horrendous storms in the Bay of Biscay and off the coast of South Africa. They nearly ran aground off Australia and finally made it to Auckland on 15 August 1877.

Five days later, the Coles family boarded the steam ship *Southern Cross* for the two-day journey to Napier. Harry Bridge had arranged an ox cart to bring them, all their belongings and Edward's tools the rest of the way to Onga Onga. Their journey finally ended on 22 August 1877.

It was cold, wet and grey when they arrived. Thankfully there was no way of going back as Clara, by all accounts, was totally unimpressed by the barren wastes that she saw and wanted to return immediately to England.

Of all the members of the Coles family, Clara had suffered the most. She was pregnant throughout the voyage and

endured continual sickness on the *Columbus*. She gave birth to Freddie Coles three weeks after they set foot in New Zealand. In total, the marriage of Edward and Clara Coles was blessed with sixteen children.

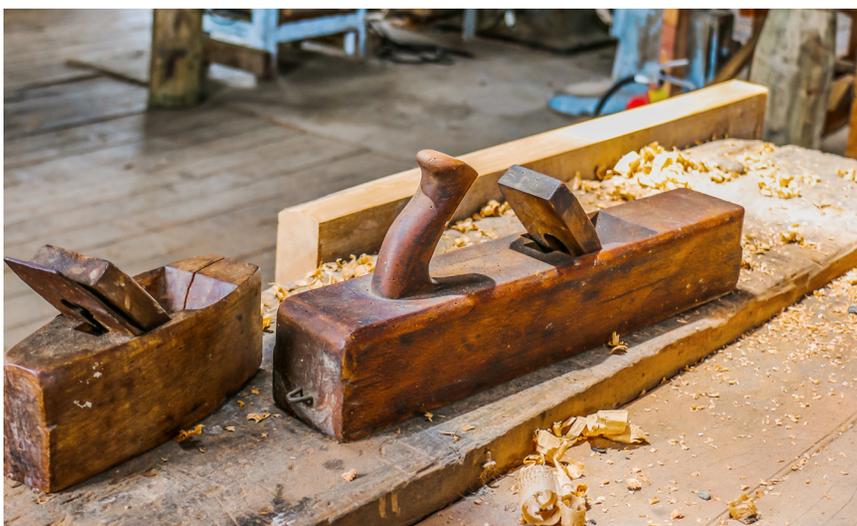
The first building project Edward Coles undertook was a majestic house, woolshed and other outbuildings for Harry Bridge himself. The Coles Factory followed later in 1878, along with other houses and a flour mill. Over the years, the Coles family constructed residential homes, shops, churches, a dairy factory and other iconic wooden buildings across Onga Onga and the wider community. Many of those early buildings remain to this day.

“The Coles Factory is one of the few surviving buildings of its kind in New Zealand,” explains Dennis Schaw, president of the Onga Onga Historical Society. “It was built to last. We're so lucky it's in such good condition.”

The Factory was generously donated to the Society in 2014 by the last private owners, Greg and Anne Frater, in exchange for one dollar. It reopened in October last year and is now part of the Onga Onga Museum.

“It used to be the heartbeat of the village and once employed over twenty people. Our aim is to get the machines working again.” Schaw, like Harry Bridge and Edward Coles before him, is excited about future generations of children and adults alike learning new skills, making useful artefacts and experiencing what life was really like in the Coles Factory.

“For this restoration project, we need to raise \$300k. We've started a Givealittle page as part of a full programme of fundraising activities. The energy for this within the village is truly inspiring.” Schaw is understandably passionate about this project and welcomes all fundraising ideas.



Talking of which, one such event is planned for Hallowe'en this year. Are you tired of the American Trick or Treat fiasco? Want to get back to ducking apples, ghost stories, homemade Onga Onga soup with freshly baked bread? How about spending the evening in the Coles Factory where they used to make the coffins and leave the bodies overnight before burial?

“Places are limited to the first 100 tickets sold,” says Karen Bedogni, secretary of the Historical Society and party organiser for the Hallowe'en fundraiser.

“It'll be a memorable event. Who knows? You might even get to meet Edward Coles himself. He's only buried up the road after all. I'm sure he'd love to show you round his factory.”

I could go on. What about the coffin-shaped door? There's a lot more to this story. As Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, “Curiosity is lying in wait for every secret.” Why don't you visit the Coles Factory and discover the secrets for yourself? I promise you this: you will definitely not be disappointed.

For more information on the Historical Society, the Onga Onga Museum and the Hallowe'en Party, please visit <https://Onga.Ongamuseum.org.nz/>

Givealittle donations to <https://givealittle.co.nz/org/Onga-Onga-historical-society-inc>

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Dennis Schaw, Onga Onga Historical Society President



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